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NASA Prober Punished for Doing His Job

The most valuable species of bureaucratic life is the whistleblower. For it takes an insider who knows his way around the bureaucratic maze to uncover a scandal.

I have dealt with dozens of informants who had the toughness and courage to blow the whistle. All came to the same end; they became the targets in place of the real culprits.

Now another whistleblower has stepped up. Ralph Sharer, an investigator in the inspector general's office of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, dared to blow the whistle on misconduct by his colleagues in the IG office.

Retribution was swift. Sharer was transferred from Washington to California, then back to Washington. He was refused sick leave, and when he stayed home from work on his doctor's orders, he was charged with being absent without leave. He was accused of falsifying his medical records, and finally he was fired.

But Sharer hung in there. He forced an investigation of his charges by an IG team—supposedly independent and therefore impartial—from the Housing and Urban Development

Department. The investigators from next door went through their routines and then issued a whitewash report.

Sharer responded with a blistering critique accusing HUD's investigators of covering up for their NASA counterparts. Now the whole incestuous mess is being investigated by the FBI, various congressional committees and the Office of Special Counsel. The latter has ordered a stay on Sharer's firing, which was supposed to take effect on Jan. 4.

But federal officials are efficient at burying scandals. They are now slyly trying to transfer the scandals to the Reagan administration, though they occurred before Ronald Reagan became responsible for federal misconduct.

The strategy is to stick the Reagan administration with the scandals until it feels politically threatened by them. Then the White House might be induced to defend, if not join in covering up, the improprieties.

I have warned the White House of these manipulations and have been assured that the Reagan administration will heed, not hinder, Sharer's whistleblowing.

Sharer's troubles at NASA weren't the first time he has rocked the bureaucratic boat and been tossed over the side. Back in 1979, as an investigator for the General Accounting Office, Sharer gave Comptroller General Elmer Staats a top-secret intelligence report with

detailed evidence that the Soviet KGB had penetrated the GAO. Russian spies were being fed advance information on top-secret reports pertaining to national security and nuclear technology.

Sharer's bosses at GAO ordered him not to let the FBI—or congressional oversight committees—see his final report on the scandal. To his everlasting credit, he disobeyed these orders and gave the FBI a copy of his report. He was promptly assigned to study marine mammals.

Sharer also reported such security violations at GAO as briefcases with secret reports lost in the subway, CIA briefing materials left unattended overnight on desks in open areas, and microfilms of classified reports furnished to contractors without clearance.

These accusations are now being systematically leaked to the press. In one newspaper account, for example, an unnamed official was quoted as saying that Sharer saw communists "under the bed." What he actually saw—and documented—were Soviet agents in the GAO records center.

Footnote: Much of Sharer's critique of the HUD IG whitewash has now been confirmed by James Phillips, a crack investigator for Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah). My own associate, Indy Badhwar, has carefully double-checked Sharer's accusations. NASA Inspector General June Brown said she is "disturbed" by the developments.